

# THE ADVENTURES OF STANLEY BROOKE

## THE DELIBERATE DETECTIVE

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### THE MURDER OF WILLIAM BLESSING

There is no doubt whatever as to the time when the murder took place. It was between half past eleven and five and twenty to twelve.

"Well?"

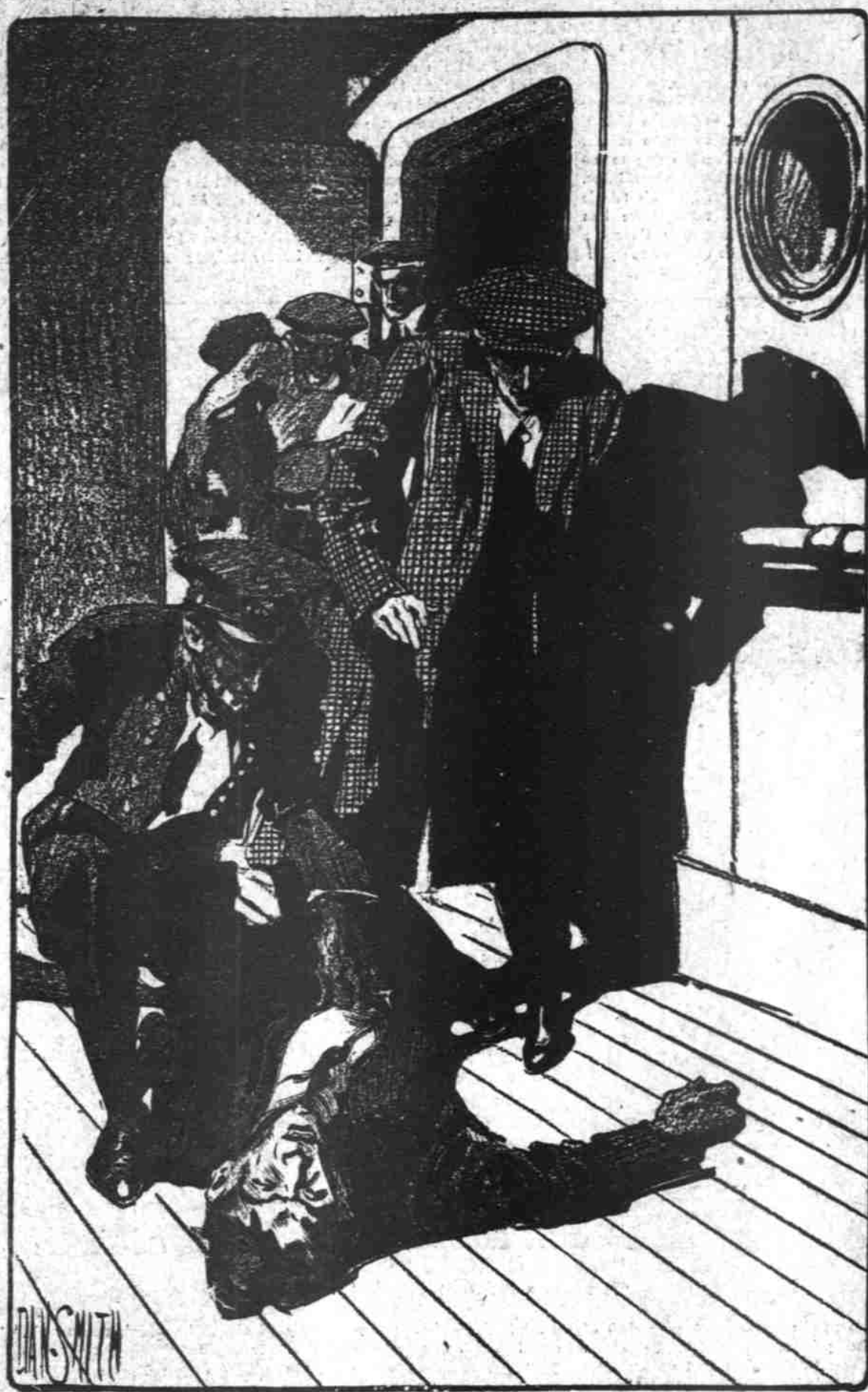
"From ten o'clock until the news of the affair was brought there Black was playing bridge in the smoking room."

"Is that certain?"

"Absolutely," he assured her. "I have it from the smoking room steward, and Major Bryce—who was one of the four. Without a doubt he was in the smoking room when the affair took place."

"She seemed a little staggered. For a few moments she said nothing."

"Failing Mr. Gordon Black," Brooke continued, "I presume you have no



Brooke looked down upon it with a shudder.

other suggestions? I'm getting rather keen.

She shook her head.

"There must have been Gordon Black," she declared.

"But the man has a perfect, a truthful alibi," Brooke ventured to point out.

"I can't help it," she persisted obstinately. "Mr. Blessing told me himself that he was afraid of him. Those papers included a forged transfer. He meant having them. He had offered Mr. Blessing twenty-five thousand pounds for them and was refused."

Brooke pointed to a school of porpoises.

"Let us talk about something else," he suggested. "What are you going to do when you get to New York?"

"Give evidence against Gordon Black at his trial for murder, I hope," she replied doggedly. "Afterward—well, I shall find something."

When Brooke returned to his chair he found that his invalid neighbor had been brought on deck and was lying here to often. Gordon Black had seen Mr. Blessing talking to me. He will be on his guard."

"It does not appear to be of much consequence," Brooke remarked. "List-

"Of course you will," he declared encouragingly. "Make up your mind that you're going to get better. That's the way."

A queer little smile flickered for a moment upon the gray lips. The man's face was almost ghastly.

"There isn't any chance of that," he said simply. "I'd like to live out the voyage—that's all."

The purser came along and paused to talk cheerfully for a few minutes to the ship's invalid. Brooke lay with half-closed eyes, looking out upon the sea.

His thoughts wandered from the pathetic little figure by his side to Mr. Gordon Black, who was strolling up and down the deck smoking a cigar. Brooke felt a peculiar interest in studying the dark, handsome face.

That the man had been a bold adventurer, a buccaner of finance, was true without a doubt. Was there really the shadow of that ghastly crime concealed behind the mask of those set features and level brows?

There was a shrill blast from the fog-horn; they had passed into a little bank of white mist. Immediately afterward a cabin steward came up, looked around the deck for a moment, and, finally advancing to Gordon Black,

There was no longer any doubt. Tragedy and Mr. Gordon Black walked hand in hand!

The next day they ran into a storm. The whole outlook was unspeakably dreary. About 11 o'clock a cabin steward came to Brooke in the smoking-room.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "Dr. Browning, the old gentleman who is ill, would take it as a great favor if you would step down to his stateroom for a moment. The poor gentleman's very bad indeed, sir," he added confidentially.

"Sure he meant me?" Brooke asked, a little puzzled.

"Certainly, sir," the man replied. "He wanted to speak to you most particular."

Brooke made his way down below at once. The little man was lying half-dressed upon the sofa berth and his appearance was ghastly. He motioned Brooke to close the door.

"Sorry to find you queer," the latter remarked cheerfully. "This weather's enough to knock any one over."

"I'm nearly done," was the reply. "I didn't reckon upon this. Please listen."

"Anything I can do for you?" Brooke began.

"Two nights ago," Dr. Browning in-

terrupted, "the man Blessing was murdered just outside my stateroom there—only a few feet away. I was lying where I am now. I heard the scuffle, the blow, the groan."

"Great heavens!" Brooke exclaimed. "You didn't see the fellow, did you?"

The doctor shook his head. He was speaking with the utmost difficulty.

"I saw nothing, but I heard the fall of something just outside my door, which was about a foot open. I dragged myself there."

"I picked up this."

He opened his coat; a long envelope, apparently stuffed with papers, was lying there. Brooke gazed at it with fascinated eyes.

"Why haven't you mentioned it before—told the captain or some one?" he asked.

The little doctor paused for several moments to recover his breath.

"I made up my mind that this packet should go straight from my hands to the chief of police in New York," he said. "Everything is talked about on board ship. I decided to keep silent. Since then I have been terrified—almost to death. Last night and the night before a man has been in my room. My trunk, the cushions here, have been searched. I lay shivering in my bunk. The packet was between my two mattresses."

"Who was the man?" Brooke asked.

"I couldn't reach the light—I dared not have turned it on if I could have done so," was the almost plaintive reply. "It might have been a steward. I had courage once—but now—you see what I am. I can't bear another night. I want you to take this packet."

Once more he produced the envelope. Brooke took it.

"What am I to do with it?"

"Keep it until we are safely off the steamer," Dr. Browning begged. "Bring it to me the moment after we land; I shall be at No. 387, the Waldorf-Astoria. My room is already engaged. I shall lie there and wait for you."

Brooke thrust the packet into the breast pocket of his tweed coat, which he buttoned up closely.

"Very well," he promised. "I'll do as you say."

The little man leaned back upon his sofa.

Brooke tiptoed his way out of the stateroom and sat in his stateroom chair upon the deck for an hour without moving. Then he rose and made his way to the second-class portion of the ship, where he found Constance in a sheltered corner.

"Supposing," he said, "I was able to help toward the clearing up of this little affair, I take it that it would be a sort of satisfaction to you?"

"It would be more than that," she answered firmly.

"Very well, then," he continued. "I am by way of making a bargain. Supposing I succeed, will you lunch with me at the Waldorf-Astoria at 1 o'clock on the day after we arrive, and will you promise to let me know your whereabouts for the first month of your stay in New York?"

She looked at him, a little softened—and yet suspicious.

"I can't see what satisfaction that would be to you," she remarked.

"My lookout, that isn't it?" he reminded her gently.

"I haven't any clothes to come out to luncheon in," she told him.

"If you will wear the clothes," he replied, "which you wore when you came on the steamer."

"Well, I had to have a new frock," she interrupted, a little defiantly, "and I couldn't come aboard without a new hat, could I?"

He laughed.

"It's a bargain, then."

"Aren't you going to tell me anything?" she asked.

"Not at present," he replied. "To tell you the truth, there's so much that I don't understand myself."

The end of the voyage, so eagerly looked forward to by many of the passengers, was certainly not disappointing in the matter of sensation.

The steamer was boarded in the harbor by two detectives, whose every movement was watched with intense interest. They made their way at once to the captain's cabin, where they remained for at least a quarter of an hour.

When they returned to the deck they came face to face with Mr. Gordon Black. He was smoking a large cigar and, so far from showing any signs of discomfort, accosted the two men and shook hands with them. A slight sense of disappointment began to manifest itself among the passengers. They were never almost up to the landing stage and nothing had happened.

Mr. Gordon Black, whose arrest by the New York police had been looked upon as a certainty, remained very much at liberty. The two detectives were talking to no one nor showing any signs of imminent action. It seemed too, as though the murderer of Mr. Blessing were to walk off the ship unmolested.

Then there was a little commotion at the companionway. Two of the stewards emerged, carrying a steamer chair upon which Dr. Browning was stretched out. He was wearing a shore-going hat, and, though his appearance was ghastly, he was doing his best to exchange farewells with those of the passengers whom he passed.

His chair was set down close to the gangway and within a few feet of the detectives. At that moment Brooke strolled up. He pointed to the chair.

"I give that man in charge, officer," he said to the nearer detective, "for the murder of William Blessing on this boat."

Brooke had spoken without raising his voice in the least, but his words had been perfectly distinct. What followed seemed nothing short of miraculous.

With a single bound Browning was at the side of the ship. He sent sprawling a passenger who inadvertently barred his path, and a seaman who made an instinctive movement toward him as he tripped up with a dexterity which was simply amazing.

They saw him for a moment and heard a splash. Then every one rushed to the side of the ship.

"Your man, right enough," Brooke remarked to the detective.

"That's Tim, sure," was the prompt reply. "I wish to God I'd believe it, and we wouldn't have bungled the job!"

The steamer was within forty yards of the dock, and the only open space around was the space which had been left for her to clear. Two sailors dived, and a dozen boats were in the water within five minutes. Nevertheless, the passengers were obliged to disembark without learning what had become of their late steamer companion.

Constance arrived punctually at the Waldorf on the following morning. Brooke led her to the table which he had reserved and watched the color stream into her cheeks as she bent over the roses which were lying by her plate.

"Well," he announced cheerfully, "I've ordered luncheon—all manner of weird dishes, with just one or two we are sure of. I didn't order champagne because I thought you'd prefer that for dinner."

"What do you mean?" she asked, half indignantly.

"Never mind," he replied. "I can see you are bubbling over with questions. Read the papers this morning?"

She shook her head.

"I've been too busy."

"Then I'll have to tell you a few facts first," he said. "The whole affair hinges around the great struggle between Gordon Black and Seth Pryor. Black stepped over the line a bit and had to leave the country. The documents which would have incriminated him were in England."

"Blessing went over as Pryor's agent, to buy them. Our little friend, Dr. Browning, who has a dozen aliases, and who is more wanted by the New York police than any other man on earth, was also on to the game, only what he wanted was to steal the papers. Very well. Blessing gets them. Gordon Black, acting on a hint he received from New York, sails for home."

"Dr. Browning—Tim, the New York police call him—books on the same steamer. Tim murders Blessing and gets hold of the documents. Having got them, he tries to think out the safest way to make use of them. Blessing was murdered outside his door. On the whole, it is safe for him to land in New York without those documents in his possession."

"He pitches on the most ingenious-looking of his fellow-passengers and hands them over to me to take care of. One or two little things about the man, however, during the last few days, gave me to think, as one says. I watched him like a lynx for the last twenty-four hours and was convinced that he was shamming. The rest is obvious."

"And what about Mr. Gordon Black?" she asked.

"Therein," Brooke replied, "lies the humor of the situation, if one can use such a word at all in connection with the affair. The two great factions headed by Black and Seth Pryor made peace one day last week. The documents for which our little friend hoped to get \$100,000, and for which Mr. Black had actually bid \$25,000, are valueless. Quite a dramatic little business, wasn't it?"

"What about the note which you saw Mr. Gordon Black receive on deck?"

"That was from Browning, although he didn't sign it," Brooke explained. "It was just a little reminder that those documents were still in existence."

"There isn't anything in life," she said softly, "so wonderful as to realize these things going on around you; to watch other people and wonder what secrets they are carrying about with them."

"I'm glad you feel like that," Brooke answered, "because that sort of thing is a bit of hobby of mine, too. Found another post yet?"

"Not yet."

"I offer you one," he declared, filling her glass with hock. "Secretary, companion, and—"

She put out her hand, checking him, as if his words had smitten her with poignant edge.

"No, no," she pleaded, her soft eyes appealing to him sorrowfully; "wait, please wait!"

He lapsed into thoughtful silence. Perhaps he was pushing the matter rather indelicately, somewhat hastily. So he reasoned after a minute's cogitation. Better wait, indeed, than ruin it all.

"You had joined Blessing," said he slowly, looking at her with frank directness, "and meant to help him in his detective work?"

She nodded, the flush of excitement, due to the crisis which she had staved off, brightening her cheeks and lips. Brooke wanted to kiss her. He wanted to tell her so. But it might be wiser—of course, it would be wiser—to wait.

He leaned his elbows on the table, talking across to her confidentially. "What do you say to a partnership—business—with me as the other member of the firm?" he suggested. "Let's open a detective bureau in London—there's a world of work waiting—on equal terms."

She shook her head. "I have no capital for such a venture," said she. "I must stay here and fight."

"You have your brains and your typewriter," said he, his face glowing with the heat of his new idea. "You can't remain here friendless, with no business connection, you know. Say that you'll put your typewriter and business experience against my capital and join the venture."

"There's a great field—with your well-known talent as a business asset," she admitted, catching some of his fire.

"Then let's call it done!" he exclaimed. "Well, return by the next steamer, and I'll have you near me, at least, while I—"

"Wait," she said.

"Wait," said he.

She offered her hand. "A strictly business partnership, Mr. Brooke," she blushed. "And you must promise me not to mention—not to—to—"

There was a supplication almost painful in her solemn eyes.

"I'll wait," said he.